COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"Chuck, when that interviewer at the grocery store asked you whether you'd rather have rice than potatoes, you said 'Yes!' We've been married for more than 20 years, and I'm just now learning that you like rice more than potatoes!" Susan said, her voice becoming shrill.

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Susan," Chuck said sheepishly.

"Chuck," Susan asked, "are there other things that you like or don't like that you haven't told me about during these more than 20 years I've been your wife?"

"Well, um, probably."

"Probably? Probably? Why haven't you been telling me about these things?"

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"Well, I don't know. I guess I just didn't think they were all that important."

"Not important? Chuck, we have potatoes almost every night that I cook. And frankly, I don't like potatoes all that much. I wouldn't care if I never saw a potato again. Now I find out you like rice better!"

"Sue, why didn't you ever tell me that you don't like potatoes?"

"Well I, uh, uh . . ."

COMFORTING MESSAGES

Comforting is helping people feel better about themselves, their behavior, or their situation by creating a safe conversational space where they can express their feelings and work out a plan for the future.

- **buffering messages –** *comforting messages that are phrased very politely in ways that address another person's face needs.*

- **positive face needs –** *the desires to be appreciated and approved, liked, and honored.*

SKILLS FOR COMFORTING

1. **Clarify supportive intentions.**

2. **Buffer face threats with politeness.**

3. **Encourage understanding through other-centered messages.**

- **Reframe the situation.** *Offering ideas, observations, information, or alternative explanations that might help a relational partner understand a situation in a different light.*

- **Give advice.** *Presenting relevant suggestions and proposals that a person can use to resolve a situation.*

GENDER AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN COMFORTING

- A growing body of research suggests that both men and women place a high value on emotional support from their partners in a variety of relationships; siblings, same-sex friendships, opposite-sex friendships, and romantic relationships (Burleson, 2003). Research does suggest, however, several differences related to race and ethnicity:

1. European Americans, more than other American ethnic groups, believe that openly discussing feelings will help a person feel better.

2. Americans are more sensitive to other-centered messages than are Chinese.

3. Both Chinese and Americans view avoidance strategies as less appropriate than approach strategies, but Chinese see avoidance as more appropriate than Americans do.

4. Married Chinese and married Americans both view the emotional support provided by their spouse to be the most important type of social support they receive.

5. African Americans place lower value on their partner's emotional support skills than do European or Asian Americans. This is especially true for African American women.

MANAGING PRIVACY AND DISCLOSURE IN RELATIONSHIPS

- **Disclosure –** *revealing confidential or secret information about others as well as yourself.*
- **Privacy –** *the right of an individual to keep biographical data, personal ideas, and feelings secret.*
- **privacy management –** *exercising personal control over confidential information in order to enhance autonomy or minimize vulnerability.*

MANAGING PRIVACY AND DISCLOSURE IN RELATIONSHIPS

People use culture, gender, motivation, context, and risk-benefit analysis as criteria in creating rules for revealing and concealing of information (Petronio, 2002):

- Individualistic cultures value privacy more than collectivist cultures do. Members of individualistic cultures are less likely to disclose personal information to anyone but close intimates.

- Men or women who strongly identify themselves as masculine or feminine are likely to use rules for disclosure and privacy that correspond to sex-role stereotypes (Snell, Belk, & Hawkins, 1986). In cultures where the male stereotype includes "strong and silent" and competitive, men are likely to keep their feelings to themselves and to avoid disclosing private information that might be used against them.

- We are more likely to disclose when we have a specific motive. For example, we are more likely to disclose to avoid loneliness or to attract someone we are interested in knowing.

MANAGING PRIVACY AND DISCLOSURE IN RELATIONSHIPS

- Privacy and disclosure rules, like other communication rules, are influenced by the situation. We may disclose private information to a therapist or counselor in order to cope with a problem. In times of crisis, we may open up to people with whom we do not normally disclose.

- One of the most important criteria we use to decide whether to disclose information or keep it private is the risk-benefit analysis. That is, we weigh the advantages we might gain by disclosing or maintaining private information against the disadvantages of disclosing or maintaining private information.

EFFECTS ON INTIMACY

- The effects of privacy and disclosure on intimacy in a relationship are not straightforward. Sometimes disclosure deepens intimacy. Other times, disclosure can decrease intimacy.

EXPECTATIONS OF RECIPROCITY

Whether your disclosure is matched by similar disclosure from your partner also can affect your relationship. Although you may expect reciprocity, recent research (Dindia, 2000b) suggests there can be a long time lag after one person discloses before the other reciprocates. In between, their conversations may center on non-personal topics.

INFORMATION CO-OWNERSHIP

A third way that decisions about disclosure and privacy affect relationships has to do with how partners treat the private information that each has shared with the other. When you disclose a secret to your partner, you expect your partner to respect your privacy and not disclose your private information with others. Similarly, you and your partner may share experiences and make decisions that you consider private, and you expect your partner to protect these as well.

GUIDELINES AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR DISCLOSURE 1. SHARING PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. Self-disclose the kind of information you want others to disclose to you.

2. Self-disclose more intimate information only when the disclosure represents an acceptable risk.

2. SHARING FEELINGS

The best way to share feelings is by describing them. **Describing feelings** is the skill of naming the emotions you are feeling without judging them.

1. **Identify the behavior that triggered the feeling.**
2. **Identify the specific emotion you are experiencing as a result of the behavior.**
3. **Frame your response as an "I" statement.**
4. **Verbalize the specific feeling.**

3. PROVIDING PERSONAL FEEDBACK

1. **Describing behavior.**

2. **Praising positive behavior.**

3. **Giving constructive criticism.**

   – *Ask the person's permission before giving criticism.*

   – *Describe the behavior and its consequences by accurately recounting precisely what was said or done and the reaction of those affected by it.*

   – *Preface constructive criticism with an affirming statement.*

   – *When appropriate, suggest how the person can change the behavior.*

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING PRIVACY

- Change the subject.
- Mask feelings.
- Tell a white lie.

DIRECT STRATEGY FOR MAINTAINING PRIVACY: ESTABLISH A BOUNDARY

The skill of **establishing a boundary** allows you to effectively respond to people who expect you to disclose information you prefer to keep private.

1. **Recognize why you are choosing not to share the information.**

2. **Identify your rule that guided this decision.**

3. **Form an "I"-centered message that briefly establishes a boundary.**

NEGOTIATING DIFFERENT NEEDS, WANTS, AND PREFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIPS

Even two people who are in a mutually satisfying, intimate relationship have different needs, wants, and preferences. We negotiate our differences in relationships by communicating our personal needs and preferences and by managing the conflict that occurs when our needs, wants, and preferences do not match those of our partner.

COMMUNICATING PERSONAL NEEDS, WANTS, AND PREFERENCES: PASSIVE, AGGRESSIVE, AND ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR

- **passive behavior –** *not expressing personal preferences or defending our rights because we fear the cost and are insecure in the relationships, have very low self-esteem, or value the other person above ourselves.*

- **aggressive behavior –** *belligerently or violently confronting another with your preferences, feelings, needs, or rights with little regard for the situation or for the feelings or rights of others.*

- **assertive behavior –** *expressing your personal preferences and defending your personal rights while respecting the preferences and rights of others.*

CHARACTERISTICS OF ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR

Own your feelings	Assertive individuals acknowledge that the thoughts and feelings expressed are theirs.
Avoid confrontational language	Assertive individuals do not use threats, evaluations, or dogmatic language.
Use specific statements directed to the behaviors at hand	Instead of focusing on extraneous issues, assertive individuals use descriptive statements that focus on the issue that is most relevant.
Maintain eye contact and firm body position	Assertive individuals look people in the eye rather than shifting gaze, looking at the floor, swaying back and forth, hunching over, or using other signs that may be perceived as indecisive or lacking conviction.
Maintain a firm but pleasant tone of voice	Assertive individuals speak firmly but at a normal pitch, volume, and rate.
Avoid hemming and hawing	Assertive individuals avoid vocalized pauses and other signs of indecisiveness.

CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN PASSIVE, AGGRESSIVE, AND ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR

Although what is labeled appropriate behavior varies across cultures, the results of passive and aggressive behaviors seem universal. Passive behavior can cause resentment and aggressive behavior leads to fear and misunderstanding. When talking with people whose culture, background, or lifestyle differs from your own, you may need to observe their behavior and their responses to your statements before you can be sure about the kinds of behavior that are likely to effectively communicate your needs, wants, and preferences.

MANAGING CONFLICT IN RELATIONSHIPS

Interpersonal conflict exists when the needs or ideas of one person are at odds with the needs or ideas of another. In these conflict situations, participants have choices about how they act and how they communicate with each other.

STYLES OF CONFLICT:

When faced with a conflict, you can withdraw, accommodate, force, compromise, or collaborate.

- **Withdrawing –** *managing conflict by physically or psychologically removing yourself.*
- **Accommodating –** *managing conflict by satisfying others' needs or accepting others' ideas while neglecting our own.*
- **Forcing –** *managing conflict by satisfying your own needs or advancing your own ideas, with no concern for the needs or ideas of the other and no concern for the harm done to the relationship.*
- **Compromising –** *managing conflict by giving up part of what you want, to provide at least some satisfaction for both parties.*
- **Collaborating –** *managing conflict by fully addressing the needs and issues of each party and arriving at a solution that is mutually satisfying.*

GUIDELINES FOR COLLABORATION

• Identify the problem and own it as your own: "Hi, I'm trying to study and I need your help."

• Describe the problem in terms of behavior, consequences, and feelings: "When I hear your music, I listen to it instead of studying, and then I get frustrated and behind schedule."

• Don't evaluate the other person's motives. Refrain from blaming or accusing: "That person isn't trying to ruin your study; she's just enjoying her music."

• Find common ground: "I would guess that you have had times when you became distracted from something you needed to do, so I'm hoping that you can help me out by lowering the volume a bit."

• Mentally rehearse so that you can state your request briefly.

GUIDELINES FOR COLLABORATION

It is more difficult to create a collaborative climate when you have to respond to a conflict that someone initiates in a confrontational manner. But you can shape the conversation toward collaboration by following these guidelines:

- Disengage. Mentally "put up your shield" and avoid a defensive response by emotionally disengaging." Remember your partner has a problem and you want to help.

- Respond empathically and with genuine interest and concern. Sometimes you need to allow your partner to vent before the partner will be ready to problem solve: "I can see that you're angry. Tell me about it."

GUIDELINES FOR COLLABORATION

- Paraphrase your understanding of the problem and ask questions to clarify issues: "Is it the volume of my music or the type of music that is making it difficult for you to study?"

- Seek common ground by finding some aspect of the complaint that you can honestly agree with: "I can understand that you would be upset about losing precious study time."

- Ask the other person to suggest alternative solutions: "Can you give me a couple of ideas about how we could resolve this so your study is more effective?"